Murphy, Claire

Wray A2

Final Draft – Living History Paper

Two is better than one

Wiping the white gun powder from my cracked fingers onto my pants, I add to the countless stains among the blue and white striped uniform. As soon as I hear the gravel shift in the distance, my hands report directly to my sides; I stand up as tall as I can manage and I flex to appear as muscular as ever. The pressure in the air around us increases as we all silently fight to take up as much room as we can. To my left stands my brother Erich, I see eye to eye with him and notice the sun so innocently reflecting off his sunflower blond buzz cut, it’s a mystery how the sun can shine in a place like this. Now the sound of shifting gravel creeps closer; as the noise becomes clearer my head darts back to face the front and I focus on my size, mainly what I can do in the next few seconds to look as far from death and weakness as possible.

Standing here reminds me of the first Selektion I ever attended; it was only a month or so ago, maybe even longer. I’ve lost all concept of time while being here, it’s troublesome to think that maybe time has lost track of me too.

*We got let out of the cattle cars after ‘resettlement’ from the city of Munich nine miles away, we had been stuck in the darkness for so long and then all at once the brakes ground and the thick air that was consuming was pierced by the opening of hundreds of eyes searching in the dark. Then the air was penetrated by the breathe of people around me who were arguably lifeless just a moment ago, all reminiscing on what they had left behind and creating useless plans on how to return home, all followed by a blinding sheet of light.. An SS officer all dressed in a black uniform yelled at us to get out, whatever poise or grace we had left in us was gone as we scrambled off the high ledge of the cattle car towards what felt like freedom, but we had far better things behind us that what we had scrambled into. We passed through the metal gates that read “Arbeit Macht Frei” I scoffed at this idea, since when was work a liberating task? To the left were rows of monotony, 32 of elongated and squat barracks, for a place so newly created it was incredible how worn down it looked. Our single file line, consisted of men and the women opposite us, moved at a slower pace for a while as black-uniformed officers circled us individually and judged our physical characteristics, how goddam unfair, I remember thinking of the injustice not yet comprehending what it meant when I was sent to the right line instead of the left.*

Suddenly a melody cuts through my thoughts, it is a familiar sound but I can’t quite put my finger on it now. I can tell for sure that it is a Wagnerian Opera, my mother always used to play them, but I cannot be sure of which one yet. I hear abnormalities in the footsteps of my near companions, two steps and then a jabbing sound which is too sharp for a foot, unless of course one had a peg-leg. I tilt my head down to find the root of this sound, from the ground stands erect a single wooden cane and atop that two hands, one folded over the other, enveloped in white gloves. Now my eyes land upon his face, surrounded by dark-brown and well groomed hair and his gapped teeth just slightly showing in a malicious grin, he was immaculately dressed for being at such a filthy destination.

An SS officer stands assertively in front of us and next to the new member of our gathering as he announces, “Guten Morgen. Today we have a special guest joining us for our Selektion, Doctor Josef Mengele. Mengele is originally from Bavaria and has education in Gymnasium, has a medical degree, PhD, and a Doctorate of Philosophy from the University of Munich. He is a trusted member of the Nazi and SS party and we have faith in him as the chief doctor over at Auschwitz. Because there are over 67,000 people registered here at Dachau right now, Dr. Mengele’s time with us is limited so this process should not take very much time. Now when your name is called, please step forward and then we will let you know where to go next.”

I now glance around at my newfound brothers, all of us brought together by our purple triangles (those of the Jehovah’s Witness Faith) or our yellow stars (Jewish symbol of David). All victims of this Shoah, the Hebrew term for Holocaust, we have ended up separate from our families, our clothes, and our hair; I find myself in these other men who have lost everything, I am manifested in them and them in me.

“235188, Krüger,” barks the SS Officer. I think back to one of Hans Krüger and I’s first conversation in barrack number 21.

*“I had no idea why on earth I would be sent to such a place, until on the cattle cars my parents told me that my grandfather was a Jew. I can’t understand that these damn Nazi’s would use that against me, I didn’t even know I was a Mischlinge! Kuhscheiße! How would they have known, I have the blondest hair in my family and greenest eyes, these Nazi’s know more about me than I do. Doesn’t that frighten you some, Bernd?” I nodded my head slowly, I wonder what they could tell me about myself that I didn’t know, as much as it frightens me I can’t help but be equally interested. Unfortunately that’s where our conversation about how Hans ended up at Dachau has to end; his shift in Canada is starting soon. Working in the warehouse of people’s personal belongings sounds like an intriguing job to me, see what people packed when they came here, only if you’ve been here long enough to be numb to death though.*

Dr. Mengele takes a walk around Hans, looking at him from head to toe. Working out in the warehouse seems to have provided him with a good amount of physical exercise, because of his amount of muscle (which relative to everyone else, was impressive) his skin didn’t cling to his limbs quite as desperately as others, and thus Mengele points at Hans with his cane to move to the right. We all register this move and wait for our dreadful encounter, hoping the whole time to be pointed to go to the right with able-bodied Hans.

“237754, Becker,” calls out the uniformed individual, my mind wanders to reminisce Wilhelm Becker and I discussing his journey in our bunks before resting for the night.

*“I guess it’s every man for himself out there now, isn’t it?” Wilhelm starts, “I’m a victim of collaborators you could say, our neighbors swore never to reveal our Jewish nature but they were just like the rest of those people who, when it came down to it, only looked out for themselves. After we arrived here I reunited with another neighbor from my town that had just arrived, he said that the people that turned us in partook in Aryanization. They allowed Nazi’s to immediately take our property and put it on the market; they must have been compensated for their help. Some people are so selfish, what happens when I return home? It can’t all go back to normal it just can’t.” I don’t know how to respond to that, I never really was one to comfort, I’m trying to encourage him that when he makes it back home maybe those people were just trying to throw the Nazi’s off and are truly loyal to Wilhelm and his family. I have run out of things to say, so I give Erich a pleading look and he swoops in to my rescue.*

As Dr. Mengele observes Wilhelm we are all thinking the same thing, left line. As much as we love him he is a muselmann and would die soon from starvation anyways, rather a less brutal and elongated way of dying if it can be helped. Reading my mind, Mengele points his cane to the left and Wilhelm follows his instructions, his eyes have glazed over now as he awaits his impending fate.

“236554 Walter,” demands the officer. Careful not to show any weaknesses I step forward without hesitation, “Since we are running so low on time we will be doing multiple people at once, 236555 Walter, 239485 Rudo—.“ The officer didn’t get a chance to finish the last name before Dr. Mengele deftly grabbed the clipboard with names and numbers, he whispers something into the officer’s ear and the man nods. Mengele forms a sinister sneer and his eyes look straight into mine as he lifts up his cane and points it directly at me then Erich and wiggles his finger inviting us to go directly to him. Now I know what opera he is humming, it’s Götterdämmerung, a word which refers to a catastrophic conclusion of events.

The SS Officer looks confused as we walk right out of Selektion and past all of the barracks, ending up at the front gate. Dr. Mengele seems to know all of the officers around here and they all seem to respect him, he looks at the men guarding the gate and nods, they leave their posts to walk right behind Erich and me to the main office at Dachau. Mengele asks us to stay outside the building and wait for him, but as we wait there we can’t help but listen to the conversation between Mengele and the fuhrer of Dachau, Mr. Brenner.

“These two boys could lead to scientific breakthroughs, all of my hard work could pay off because of this pair,” Mengele pleaded..

Erich and I look at each other and then the guards who had lost interest in two seemingly mute and docile prisoners and went to read their *Schwarze Korpi* newspaper instead, we continue to eavesdrop on the discussion as Brenner argues, “They are two of our most able-bodied *men* here and I don’t know if we can risk losing their incredible efficiency with their job.”

“Listen, I understand your request, but imagine that your consent could lead to the discovery of how to breed ‘pure-Germans’ if I can perfect the dying of eye color! I keep records of all of my work, thoroughly and accurately measure all my patients, and if they need be killed we can carefully inject them with a euthanasia and use their organs for further research,” Mengele insists, “They are so identical and perfect for my experiment, I cannot stress enough how big of an opportunity this is for the entire country of Germany.

“Fine, take them, but don’t try to take all of my strong and able works now Josef, we need a lot of those around here,” Brenner left it on that note.

He walks out of the office calmly, but with that damn grin on his face as he saunters past us waving his pristine white gloves to show that we are to follow. So we do, Erich and I equally confused and with pits in our stomachs try to keep up with his fast pace. As we walk through the gates a yield a moment to take this all in, I don’t really know anything anymore. I don’t know what is happening even one day in the future, but I do acknowledge the fact that I will probably and hopefully never be back here again. Looking back at the rows of barracks and lines of prisoners trudging along I try to take a deep breath and soak it all in, but I end up coughing instead, there’s too many ashes from the dead bodies floating around in the air; now I realize I never want to look back on a place like this,

Erich and Mengele have ended up so far in front of me I walk as fast as I can manage and meet up with them, I slide in the backseat of a plush new automobile to sit next to Erich. Mengele and a driver occupy the front seats and in the rear I cannot keep my weary eyes open any longer; the seats are too luxurious and I fall straight to sleep.

My shoulder is being shaken by some force, I look up groggily to see Erich’s earnest eyes piercing through me.

“Get up! Get up! You’ve got to see this,” he delivers in awe.

I look out my window only to have my gaze met by a giant layout of buildings, I would never have imagined Erich and I were headed some place so grand.

“Welcome to Auschwitz, now what are your names again?” Mengele inquired as he turns around from the front seat to face us.

“I am Bernd and this is my brother Erich,” I replied with less enthusiasm.

“Tell me, the officer back at Dachau confirmed this, but I’d rather have it straight from the source, are you two really twins? I mean you look identical but legitimately are you two?” Mengele prodded.

This time Erich spoke up, “Yes, identical twins, since birth.” he stated in a borderline facetious tone.

“It is truly lucky you two hadn’t been infected by Typhus the lice transmitted disease or died of starvation, I heard of 32,000 who died of one of those two causes since Dachau opened in ’33. You two must have incredible immune systems” Mengele compliments, trying to get us to open up about ourselves, thank goodness we had not been raised as ignorant people and so we kept our mouths shut. “Well we are at our final destination after a long day of traveling, willkommen to Auschwitz. We will be going straight to my office, let’s get out of the car and from there just follow me.” As he steps out of the car he seems refreshed and his body is consumed by some passion while he walks through the main gates with a vigor that is inexplicably desirous.

He begins humming again as we walk through the doorway of what appears to be his office, I feel as though I am sitting in the waiting room for a regular dentist appointment or even physician exam. I obtain that eerie feeling that often sneaks over me in these situations leaving me befuddled and nervous of what is to come next. But I am not kept wondering for long, Mengele swings through the ‘waiting room doors’ and seemingly threatens, “Erich, Bernd, right this way.”

Standing up we try not to think the worst as we walk into what looks like a room prepared for surgery, nothing that Erich nor I would need, as we stated earlier we are healthy as horses.

“Erich, we will have you come through these doors into this operation room and Bernd, you can sit in this chair,” Mengele passively points out, showing Erich the doors he ought to go through and then tending to getting ready for performing a surgery.

Before I can even begin to comprehend this situation I am engulfed in a hug from Erich, I guess he’s figured it out. He’s put two and two together before I could, and I’m still not quite getting it; but from the power of this hug I realize I may never see him again. So I hug back, harder. I haven’t cried since we were rounded up and sent to Dachau but I was able to endure all of those events with Erich, being separated from him is my Götterdämmerung; this is my catastrophic conclusion to everything.

One of Mengele’s assistants tears Erich and I apart as Erich yells, “Wir sehen uns dort.” See you there, Erich, wherever ‘there’ is.

I drag myself to the cold white chair in the center of the room and the lights and the equipment and take a seat, I recline back and Dr. Mengele’s face arises directly over mine. His crooked teeth sneer as his dark eyes gleam with ferocity and intentness.

“You won’t feel a thing,” he reassures me as the needle sticks into my eye, I writhe in pain and scream out as loud as I can. Suddenly I am no longer surrounded by lights or machines or Mengele, it is just me in my head. This is my catastrophic conclusion, I think, as even my thoughts begin to fade away.